
MINUTES AND MEETING SUMMARY -- DRAFT
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC Meeting
Region 5 - Billings
October 6-7, 2014 (Meeting 17)

Advisory Council members present: Dale Tribby (Chair), Joe Ball, Jay Gore, Gordon Haugen, Bill Howell, Mike Jensen, Representative Bill McChesney, Dustin Ramoie, and Craig Roberts.

Participants: Dan Bailey (Pheasants Forever), Mike Bullock, (YVCPF), Mike Bryant (Safari Club International – Montana), Gary Hammond, Debbie Hohler, Pete Husby (NRCS), Ken McDonald, Ray Mule', Rick Northrup, Matt O'Connor (Habitat Forever), Megan O'Reilley, C. T. Ripley (Safari Club International – Montana), Jackie Tooke, Jay Watson, Mike Whittington (Billings Rod & Gun Club), Dennis Yurian (Habitat Forever).

Monday, October 6, 2014 (Day 1)

1. Dale called the meeting to order at 8:00 am.

After introductions, Dale highlighted some of the topics he'd like Council input on: (1) future Council membership, (2) input on how new techs and how they will be utilized, (3) habitat leases – Debbie sent out a draft, and (4) feedback on scheduled field trips. There will be time on Tuesday for input and discussion.

2. Update from Ken McDonald.

- * Gearing up for the upcoming legislative session. At end of last session, the legislature said that all state agencies need to reduce personnel by 4%. In the past, agencies were underfunded/under staffed. Now, agencies reduce dollars and positions. The 4% reduction sent to the Governor's office included 5 positions in the Wildlife Division, including the 3 vacant UGBEP positions. Now, position descriptions have been changed, requiring a minimum of a bachelor's degree. Because these positions are funded using earmarked dollars, FWP may be able to make the case to maintain the position. Dale asked when will FWP know about these positions, and Ken said it is driven by the legislative session and House Bill2, typically the last thing legislators address.
- Council held discussions on license fee increase, shortfall, and concerns about habitat programs and legislative ideology. The legislative session will be difficult for the department to make headway or to even sustain habitat programs given concerns over owning lands and even for the purchase of conservation easements. Joe Perry stated that the legislature should listen to the committees they set up, such as the UGBEP Council. Rep. McChesney stated that this council should and can play a significant role in ensuring preservation of the program, but need information between meetings.

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- * Council held a discussion about filling the positions. Concern was raised that all 3 positions weren't filled and that there was a field season without any work. Council wants updates once in a while to let people know what is going on.
 - Mike J. provided input about a habitat specialist from Tennessee. The specialist had equipment and put in food plots for wildlife all over the state. He feels the real issue is getting work done on the ground. The Sheridan County MOU worked for a time then landowners lost interest because of the oil boom. Additionally, farming is all about timing and landowners don't have time to do this.
 - * Discussion on another council that was appointed to work on license structure for solvency for 4 years. The EQC passed with one vote. LC385 was the result and would make FWP whole for 4 more years. One alternative is an across-the-board cut of earmarked programs, which would be about a 45% cut of programs. Joe P. pointed out that this package is a stopgap measure, not a general fee increase. If this doesn't pass, it will be very difficult. Because of Pittman-Robertson match (75:25 percent), Ken stated that for every license dollar cut, the department will only generate \$0.25.
 - * Other legislative items include 2 bill requests. (1) LC23 to prohibit hunting of sage-grouse. (2) Prohibit individuals with conservation easements to participate in the Block Management Program. Ken provided an overview of 6 other bills requested by the department.
 - * PLPW – Home to Hunt: Allowed 500 additional deer and 500 elk licenses to be sold to former Montana citizens.
3. Jay Watson provided an overview of today's tour on Pompeys Pillar and Yellowstone WMA. Council loaded up in vans and went on the habitat tour. BBQ lunch provided.
4. Public comment period at 6:30 pm at FWP Region 5 headquarters. 5 members of the public participated.
- * Dale thanked Region 5 staff for an excellent tour. Council has heard a lot about the projects in the past, but it is good to see them on the ground. Council will continue discussion on these projects tomorrow, and he encourages council to share their observations.
 - * Because license dollars are used on these projects, Dale reiterated the importance of public input to the council and the department. We have received a lot of comments from around the state when developing the plan. Moving forward, Council and the department need to hear continued input and recommendations from the public. Council is interested in what the public has to say.
 - * Joe P. added that the last time the Council was in Billings, there was no public participation. He is impressed with the accomplishments on the ground. It is good to have these projects so close to a population center.

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- * Dale opened up the meeting for public comment. Highlights follow:
 - C.T. Ripley, Safari Club International, wanted to know why he can't ride horses, has to stay on roads, and can't camp on the property (Yellowstone WMA). Gary Hammond responded that when conducting the Environmental Assessment, it was noted that the property was half an hour from the largest population center. Because the property was purchased with sportsman's license dollars to provide habitat, the WMA could love the place "to death" with overuse of horses, etc. Related to camping, neighbors related concerns about camping and had concerns about impacts on wildlife habitat effectiveness.
 - Michael Bullock, Yellowstone Valley Chapter of Pheasants Forever, provided feedback from the chapter. The YVCPF represents 7 or 8 counties, the largest chapter in the state. The chapter provides considerable funding in support for the project with Habitat Forever, BLM and FWP. It is very important to continue to grow the project, particularly given the proximity to Billings. He knows from experience there is "a ton" of birds in these places.
 - Mike Bryant, Safari Club International, stated that they had allocated some funds for the habitat project. They wanted to learn about the project and report back to their board of directors. The Club has a vested interest in conserving Montana, which is "Near and dear to our hearts." Joe Perry provided an in depth review of the UGBEP and the specific projects along the Yellowstone River. All dollars include requirement of public access. Mike Bryant asked FWP staff if they have seen an increase in bird counts. Jay Watson reported that yes, they are on the increase on the front end but there is hope of an expected increase given the early nature of this habitat enhancement work.
 - General discussions on habitat projects, pheasant planting, predation, and habitat features ensued.
 - Safari Club International also helped pay for the Montana Conservation Crew contract, which involved a number of accomplishments. There is continued interest in Isaac Homestead WMA, near Hysham.
 - Mike Whittington, Billings Rod and Gun Club, said the Club is very supportive of the efforts going on along the Yellowstone. The Club has been contributing to the partnership these past few years and anticipates the Club will continue into the future. He views this as a great opportunity for families to have an opportunity to hunt near Billings. Mike also expressed appreciation of the work Jay Parks, Jay Watson, and Dennis Yurian accomplish out there.
 - Recognition plaques were presented to Yellowstone Valley Chapter of Pheasants Forever, Billings Rod and Gun Club, Phillips 66, and Safari Club International. Dale added that the emphasis on partnerships makes things possible. It's very important to have citizen's involvement. The Council showed appreciation and thanked the partners.

Tuesday, October 7, 2014 (Day 2)

A big welcome to Jackie Tooke, the new UGBEP Habitat Specialist in Miles City (R7).

Introductions were conducted.

1. Rick provided a review of the Governor's Executive Order for sage-grouse conservation and an overview of the process and elements of the order.
 - * Discussion followed about what it will take to get the habitat conservation program underway. Concerns were raised about timing with the September 2015 initiation of the 12-month finding by the USFWS. Concern was also raised about the possible interest by others to divert UGBEP funding toward the conservation effort.
 - * Joe P. reminded Council that this new conservation program should be about providing effective conservation for sage-grouse, not simply letting industry "off the hook."
 - * Perry Moved, Rep. McChesney Seconded that the Council will prepare a letter to the Governor's office asking to expedite the process for getting the Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Program in place and operating and to express concern about use of UGBEP funds. Carried.
2. Matt O'Connor, Habitat Forever, provided an overview of Habitat Forever and partnership positions.
 - * Habitat Forever has become a way to use state and other partner dollars to put efforts on the ground to achieve habitat conservation work. The specific work around Billings and Denton has become a priority for the local chapters as well as other partners. Joe Perry added that opportunities around population centers on public lands are a priority and these areas receive considerable use.
 - * Dan Bailey added that work that is done in Billings could be replicated at Canyon Ferry and Ninepipe WMAs. National Bison Range has partnered with Habitat Forever to provide similar work in that area to improve decadent nesting cover via farming by use of food plots to establish a seedbed for better cover. Mike Jensen sees this farming approach as making a lot of sense.
 - * Rick provided an overview of past and current discussions and options with PF funding. Craig Roberts noted that there has been a pretty significant achievement on these properties at Billings and Denton. Dustin would really like to see this type of work that was seen on the tours be expanded to other areas.
 - * Bill Howell offered that it would be very interest to have legislators tour the areas the Council toured. It may be a much easier sell for management and may lead to picking up additional critical habitat pieces. It's critical to get legislators on the ground. Joe Perry sees opportunity to add area legislators when on the ground looking at these projects with the Council. Council recommends following through with this approach.

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3. Debbie provided a review of program funding and obligations.
 - * A FY14 table was reviewed. The amounts still need to be confirmed before published in the legislative report.
 - * Rep. McChesney expressed concern about not having more obligations. He advised that the department have a list of projects that are in process and/or near a point of implementation. Obligations would include the NWTF position and the obligation for match to federal grants that are awarded.
 - * A question was raised over the large amount of funds remaining unspent in the program's accounts. Joe P. and Bill Howell gave input on the past history of the administrative cap (removed in 2009) that put significant restraints on program implementation.
 - * Ken Pointed out that dollars reported need to be obligated contractually. Also, only expended dollars are reported to the State's database. Obligated dollars are not reported.
 - * Dale would like copies of the legislative report handed out to the Council.
 4. Debbie provided a review of program accomplishments during the calendar year. Reporting included summaries of Habitat Forever projects, new projects initiated this year, and pheasant release activities.
 - * Council raised the question about using Pheasant Release funding to support personnel costs. Ken reported that this would require a change in statute.
 - * Regarding pheasant release, council discussed about what to do with remaining funds. Jay recommended documenting use of funds and decline of releases, building the case for doing more with these funds on habitat work. Bill also stated that the premise for changing the pheasant release statute needs to include education on the role of habitat in supporting bird numbers. Dale suggested the department look at what costs are associated with bird releases, including all administrative costs. The real cost of pheasant release program is more than we show if the administrative costs are added.
 - * **MOU with FSA** – has been signed by both agencies. We are awaiting information to be provided by FSA.
 - * **NFWF Grant** – haven't heard if we will be awarded funding. Committed \$250,000 from UGBEP and another \$150,000 from Migratory Bird Program and requested approximately \$250,000 from National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant offering. This project would involve paying \$15 per acre, a one-time payment, for a commitment of 30 years to conserve mixed grass prairie habitats.

5. Regional Updates

- * Debbie provided reviews of accomplishments and planned activities for each region.

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- * Discussion about Region 3 Poindexter Fishing Access Site project and the expectation of the local PF chapter to release pheasants on that site, in addition to the habitat enhancement work that has been conducted. Question of whether there has been any crowing counts have been conducted there. Debbie will follow up with the biologist.
 - * Region 4 – Easement by Cascade. In the past, the department has come to the council and a good presentation of what is planned. Council informed the department that it would have been good to have a presentation on this project. Council members get a lot of questions from the public, and it would help them if they were better informed. Department will present on this topic later today.
5. Region 5- Jay and Ray provided summary of partnership and current work. They also provided a summary of crowing counts on project areas and adjacent areas, including wing barrel data on the two project areas.
- * Council discussed the total birds per acre. What is an appropriate target? Ray indicated the index used is young per hen during the fall. A rooster killed per acre is probably peak productivity, according to Joe Ball.
 - * Dale expressed support and appreciation for the tour and the work being done in Region 5.

6. Council Membership

- * Joe Perry and Mike Begley would like to be replaced. Jay Gore is interested in dropping out after next fall. Gordon Haugen will let us know in the spring. Rep. Bill McChesney would like to stay on the council, even if he is not re-elected.

7. Open Fields Discussion

- * Debbie showed slides about structure of the Open Fields grant (VPA HIP).
- * Joe provided some great insight over the loss of CRP. Right now, grain prices are down –a 50 bushel crop is at a break-even price of \$5/bushel. This will be the first time that CRP may be more competitive. According to Joe, there is less incentive now to pay high rent or to pull land out of CRP. Therefore, this is an opportunity for keeping CRP. Joe feels that the Open Fields program probably deserves a fair amount more emphasis with program implementation. Joe strongly believes there is a 2 year window of opportunity for Open Fields. If we don't have enough staff, department needs to contract the help. We have missed the bulk of CRP earlier, but what is left is important. We're not going to see blocks of CRP like we have in the past. The access component is huge. Lots of hunters don't like to knock on doors...this program allows hunters to hunt on private land without having to track down landowners.
- * Gordon pointed out that a CRP contract can be dropped mid-term (at 5 years)

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- * The Council wants the department to pursue Open Fields, putting as much emphasis into that direction. Council reminded the department that they supported \$300,000 spent this year of Open Fields.
 - * Joe discussed food plots funded by UGBEP. The fixed costs are about \$250/acre. Costs will not decrease over time. Department needs to look at what we pay for food plots. They suggested that it may be necessary to increase funding.
 - * Matt O'Connor added that Iowa's Open Fields paid for grass seed and mid-contract maintenance to enhance habitat as an alternative to payments.

8. **Pete Husby recognition** – Joe recognized Pete's contribution and participation with the council. We wish Pete all the best.

9. **Review of Pheasant Bend Conservation Easement** – Rick provided overview of project, including cost at \$280,000 for 298 acres, immediately adjacent to Ulm Bridge Fishing Access Site.

10. Discussion/Observations on Yesterday's Field Trip

- * Craig – He liked what he saw and doesn't have any negative comments.
- * Bill – These areas will attract a lot of hunters. He'd like to see these enhancement activities expand to other areas.
- * Jay – This is a place for hunters to come out for 2 hours. There are a few different parking areas.
- * Joe P. – His comments about farming may have been interpreted as negative, but they weren't intended for that. In the progression of things, tillage doesn't really matter given that it is going back to permanent cover.
- * Craig would like to know of lands coming available for sale adjacent to WMAs. Pheasants Forever would like to be a part of expanding these properties when opportunities exist.
- * Dale is concerned about cottonwoods that are coming up in the fields on both properties. The taller they get, the more resistance there will be for taking them out. They will be a detriment to upland game bird production. The department needs to take out while they are small.
- * Joe P. – The department needs to document as much as possible to provide ammunition to defend these areas. Items to document might include public use, bird numbers, harvest, etc.
- * Bill asked about handicap access to these areas. At this time, not certain what would do to enhance that.
- * Joe Ball gave two thumbs up.
- * Mike Jensen hopes the equipment can be moved and used somewhere else.
- * Craig brought up the question of cost. If the department spends \$5M to purchase land, doesn't it make sense to spend \$100K to manage the place?

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- * Matt O'Connor spoke about the comparison of costs between the two project areas (Denton and Billings), there is a lot of volunteer work at Denton that is reflected to lower cost. Need to look at these project areas in terms of a research project. What we learn over time – maybe in 5 years or so—can be applied to future opportunities.
 - * Gordon reflected on landscape level projects. Many smaller projects can address limiting factors that affect larger landscape. For example, focus on a couple townships in NE MT. Need to look at larger scale rather than only parcels that we own.

11. Council's recommendations for 2015.

- * **Habitat Lease Option** – Instead of looking at creating new projects, conserve what we have. Tribby feels that working on shelterbelts appear to be time consuming. He feels there are a lot of opportunities to lease and provide walk in hunting. For example, the cooperator would agree to not graze or keep as is, and receive a lease payment for specific management activities. There may not be time to develop a habitat enhancement project, but there may be time for establishing a lease agreement.
- Question on how these leases may differ than Block Management? Block Management is structured by impact payments. For the UGBEP, this would be habitat leases that maintains a piece of habitat functional and allows for a hunting component.
- Ray Mule' stated that his experience earlier with the program were leases. They leased ground that went into a grazing management system. Resting pastures for a few years resulted in improved habitat.
- Joe P. stated that this would be an opportunity to protect smaller acreages and may be less expensive. For example, \$25/acre for average grazing fee.
- Debbie suggested paying a value equivalent to taxes.
- Dale doesn't agree with the current draft of the management lease that does not allow leases on Block Management Areas. Council needs to look at this again in the spring and see what the department has come up with.
- Joe Perry asked about payment in kind, in lieu of cash payment for BMA, but taking advantage of lease payment instead.
- As a reminder – the UGBEP does not pay for access. We need to be careful how language is framed.
- Craig stated that we need to put together some ideas on how to make this work. Joe stated that the Council could put forth a motion to motivate the department. As a pilot effort, look for smaller, higher quality areas with a 320 acre capped lease.

12. Public Comment

Dan Bailey: The public lands next to larger cities need the help, for example Canyon Ferry WMA and Ninepipe WMA. PF is willing to help on this if FWP wants to develop this further. Joe stated that PF has proven to be valuable partners and recommends that FWP look at making this work. Further, the department needs to put emphasis on how to make this work.

Relative to expansion to other areas, Dale felt the cost is extremely high, so is this thought out of line? It does not appear Dale's thinking is "out of line." However, numerous partners have made the costs "manageable." For similar projects in the future—if it comes down to FWP funding and PF partnership—it might be difficult. There is a need for partners. Joe feels there is justification for spending this kind of money, only can't justify putting them out in isolated areas. They need to be placed where we have intensive use by the public. Mike J. thinks it is time to move with this type of project/effort. He is very concerned we are going to lose funding.

Joe is not pushing to make decisions without information to make. However, it is time to make something work with PF. Motion - Authorize up to 250K to be spent on joint projects. Jensen Seconded. Department can sort out details. Motion carried. Tribby opposed, as he feels there are not enough details.

Matt O'Connor is looking for ways to put a full time person on the job. Joe Perry is willing to give a finite amount of time, but he does not recommend funding something that can't be supported in a sustainable fashion. The FWS has equipment in the Mission Valley. If they are willing to allow us to use the equipment and work on the WMA, would there be enough money to hire a full time person? There is hope is to reinvigorate the work of the PF chapters and input efforts into that project. A full-time person will need about \$65K/year. Additionally, there will be a need of \$25K/year for 3 years to do work.

Craig recognized that regional staff need to be on board and to coordinate the work to be successful. These projects can't be successful without local staff support.

13. Optional habitat tour of aspen projects in Red Lodge October 8. Meet at USFS at 9:00 am. A bbq will be held at Rock Creek Resort at 7:00 pm.

Dale adjourned the meeting 4:00 pm.

Next meeting: Helena, April 13-14, 2014. Travel day is April 12.

Future meeting will be held: October 5-6, 2015 Ninepipe WMA